Sermon delivered at the Parish of The Parks and shared with St Margaret Eltham

Lent 4 27March 2022

Luke 15: 11-32

I wonder what you know about your learning preferences. You may have heard me say before that we may learn visually, orally, aurally, or kinesthetically. I know I have a strong preference for images. They draw me in, and I can be in the present moment as a look on and experience.

Today I am going to tell you more about Henri Nouwen whom I mentioned last week. He wrote a whole book on his journey with the Rembrant painting of the Prodigal Son. When I first saw the gospel listed for today I thought; “oh no, I don’t have time to read a whole book!” Then as I re-read a couple of chapters I realised how profound this form of visual learning can be. Hence my comments in today’s pew sheet. Nouwen says “the painting allowed me to enter into the mystery of homecoming in a way I never had before”. He travelled from the US to the Hermitage in St Petersburg and spent multiple hours in front of the painting[[1]](#footnote-1). So how on earth could an image reveal theological wisdom?

Nouwen overlays his learnings from the painting with his transition from the world of university teaching to the role of chaplain in the L’ Arch community for people with mental handicaps. He moved from an academic environment where he had status to a place where he said “I knew little about announcing the gospel of Jesus to people who listened more with their hearts than with their minds and who were far more sensitive to what I lived than to what I said.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The learning road for Nouwen was at times very difficult.

He explains that he began to investigate the metaphor of journey and homecoming that the painting initiated. He began to think about the ways that he had been in the role of observer as he taught others about the spiritual life. These words rather echo O’Leary I’ve quoted in the last two weeks. That is that it is crisis or challenge that cause us to look deeply into our personal experience.

The gospel provides words that probably evoke word images. But Rembrant’s painting includes figures emerging from the shadow to look on the moment of reconciliation. I wonder if you like me have ever reflected on the second son who feels himself hard-done by. He has done everything required of a son, but he feels he has never been acknowledged in the way that his younger brother has.

Why do I think it is instructive to engage with Nouwen’s experience? I suspect that his examination of his process in relation to this painting could suggest fruitful ways to learn from a gospel reading.

Nouwen says “I myself had never really dared to step into the centre and kneel down and let myself be held by a forgiving God.” Further he says “while it had been a life-long desire to be an insider looking out, I never the less chose over and over to be the outsider looking in.[[3]](#footnote-3)” This realisation raised important personal questions for him. He came to the conclusion that to truly accept love, forgiveness, and healing is often much harder than giving it. It is a place beyond earning, deserving, and rewarding. It is a place of surrender and complete trust.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Nouwen’s inner and outer world moved and coalesced so that he found he was in an inner place where he had not been before. In the place where God has chosen to dwell. He notes this is the place where I am held safe in the embrace of an all-loving father. He also concludes that place is pain, struggle and unceasing prayer. Once again I hear O’Leary’s echo[[5]](#footnote-5).

I can short-circuit the book and tell you that Nouwen concludes that he is each of the figures in the painting or the gospel. He is the returning younger son, the older indignant son and most surprizing of all he is the loving father. The father who welcomes his children home without asking them any questions and without wanting anything from them in return. The father loves out of true compassion.

The outline of Nouwen’s journey profiles sound psychological theory and points to the multifaceted qualities, of the spiritual journey.

I have to ask you, who you are in this gospel story? What experience do you identify with? We call today as Mothering Sunday but it is better regarded as nurturing Sunday. I wonder what those words mean for you. Do you nurture yourself? Could you discover within yourself both the lost children of God and the compassionate mother and father that is God. I think that accepting the multiple roles that they lead us to internal complexity and the actions that they lead to is lour life’s-work.

I am going to zoom out from this close focus on a gospel that illuminates homecoming to comment more generally on my favourite topic; Ignatian Spirituality as a path to encountering God in the moment. Nouwen was prompted by a painting but as I suggested at the outset there may be other routes. Does music prompt strong images in your body or mind’s eye. You might like to focus on what emerges for you and ask how this image or emotion may hold an invitation for you to learn more about your relationship with God.

Similarly, body movement, ritual, or gesture may generate more emotion and information for you. Can you repeat an action meditate on it and speak with God about what you are experiencing? Sophie’s gesture of taking peace from the Lord’s table is a wonderful example. What does that mean for you transmit peace to others? What does it mean to you to make the sign of the cross? I know I am hypersensitive to gesture. I think of Princess Dianna’s funeral procession when her coffin passed the young princes. William makes the sign of the cross. I think no words I could ever hear uttered by him could communicate more to me about who Prince William is.

Similarly at the Kyrie in the Eucharist, wrapping on the chest is meaningful for me. I saw a priest make that gesture 35 years ago and I have never forgotten its power. It reminds me I am a sinner!

So, I have tried to open-up the different ways that you might learn from a gospel. Do have a look at the front of the pew sheet and see what emerges.

The Lord be with you!

Reference

Nouwen. Henri, *The Return Of The Prodigal Son* Doubleday New York 2006

O’Leary, D. *Dancing To My Death* Columbia Books Dublin2019

1. Nouwen, H. *The Return Of The Prodigal Son* pp7-17 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Nouwen, H. Ibid p 11 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Nouwen, H. Ibid p12 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Henry Nouwen Ibid P13 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. O’Leary, D. *Dancing To My Death* passim [↑](#footnote-ref-5)